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Knowledge Management in the Public Sector: Singapore's Civil Service College Shows the Way

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Intellectual and knowledge assets in an organisation need to be effectively harnessed to bring about benefits for everyone. Managing the repository of knowledge in a state-run organisation is a relatively new discipline. R Gopinathan, deputy director, Service Centre for Organisational Excellence (PSCOE) at Singapore's Civil Service College (CSC), may well be described as an evangelist who promotes knowledge management (KM) in the public service sector.

He spoke recently about past experiences and challenges ahead with developing a KM roadmap for Singapore's public service at the Fourth International Research Conference on Asian Business organised by Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business and Wee Kim Wee Centre.

Defining Knowledge Management

What exactly is KM? A leading trade magazine, CIO, defines it as the process through which organisations generate value from their intellectual and knowledge-based assets. According to Gopinathan, there is no common definition of KM. Instead, he prefers to describe it in terms of three key components: firstly, KM should contribute to growing strategic knowledge; secondly, it should address needs for knowledge to flow across the organisation; thirdly, it should create value from harnessing the knowledge.

Together with a third party firm -- widely known for best practice research and consulting on KM -- Gopinathan has developed a roadmap or practical guide to help public agencies steer through the various stages of KM development. Explaining the rationale for the roadmap, he said that there had been cases of public agencies which had begun but were unable to sustain their KM journey because of the lack of buy-in within the organisation. The failure to align the KM process with the organisation's operations and business goals is one common reason for not securing management or staff support, he said.

The KM journey begins with an understanding of what constitutes knowledge. All organisations have a repository of knowledge but not all have the expertise to harness this asset effectively, he said. Gopinathan added, "Knowledge falls into two categories, explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge refers to anything that is documented, codified or archived, whereas the people skills, the know-how in their heads, represent tacit or intangible knowledge.

"You could say that 80% of organisational knowledge is intangible," he said. The challenge of the KM journey is to tap into this intangible knowledge, so that the experience and wisdom of individuals can be captured and shared throughout the organisation for the benefit of all. "One objective of KM is to identify, generate, manage and share explicit and tacit knowledge throughout the organisation, a task that is easier said than done, and one which requires a mindset change at all levels," he said.

People Dynamics

KM is not so much about information technology or technology but about people dynamics. While information technology has been an enabler in facilitating the sharing of digitised information, people are the drivers in any KM project. Sharing his experience, Gopinathan said: "Organisations spent significant effort and money to build IT systems hoping that people would use them to store and share knowledge. Unfortunately that is not often the case."

"There can be obstacles due to the lack of understanding about the benefits and goals of KM. Circumstances and factors contributing to its success include the organisation's culture, trust between different levels of staff, and a general thirst for learning," he added.

Ultimately, a successful KM implementation enables the public agency to deliver more with the same or fewer resources, he stressed. "Education is an important aspect of KM. With each organisation, I make it a point to engage the leaders because their support is crucial and everyone must walk the talk for KM to be successful in the agency," said Gopinathan.

The other factor is a KM roadmap which represents his centre's commitment to help pave the way for the successful adoption of knowledge management by any of the Ministries and statutory bodies served by them. Apart from developing and conducting training, collating good practices in the public sector, and speaking at conferences and seminars, the PSCOE also provides advisory services where needed.

"The roadmap serves as a guide to plan, kick-start and sustain the KM journey systematically to achieve organisational outcomes," he added. The choice of a roadmap was only made after reviewing many different models from various organisations, Gopinathan said. "We needed a roadmap that will stand up to scrutiny. We adapted the version by the American Productivity and Quality Centre (APQC) which we found to be suitable for PSCOE to apply in Singapore."

The model adapted for KM roadmapping for Singapore's public sector builds on best-practice research, expertise and work in the field of knowledge management. "APQC is known for its strength in benchmarking and its use of new approaches in applying KM," explained Gopinathan.

Five Stages of the Roadmap

"There are altogether five stages identified in this KM roadmap. The value of the roadmap is derived from its practical approach, highlighting the things that ought to be done before beginning the process at each of the five stages. Adopters can, therefore, avoid mistakes that can lead to lack of buy-in during the KM journey."

The roadmap is organised with modules for each stage so organisations can use it to help them better understand where they are at in their KM journey, what are the possible gaps that need to be addressed, and best practices from other organisations that can be leveraged, explained Gopinathan.

He added that the roadmap highlights the main issues and activities at each stage. As the organisation progresses along its journey, different tools, techniques, templates and survey questionnaires are provided to steer agencies through the process.

"It begins with Stage I when there is awareness, leading to strategy formulation (Stage II), followed by pilot and experimentation (Stage III), expansion (Stage IV) and, finally, enterprise integration (Stage V)," he said.

Typically, the journey at Stage I may begin with awareness where a KM champion recognises the value of using the knowledge asset in a public agency. KM can only thrive in a culture of collaboration where members are motivated and free to share and learn from one another. At this stage, recommendations range from tips on how to share the vision and demonstrate the value of KM through interviews, surveys and others tools to measure the readiness of the organisation and identify areas of opportunities in which KM can be applied.


Stage II is the strategy formulation phase which marks a turning point where individual interest becomes an organisational initiative. The main task at this stage is to formulate the business case for suitable opportunities and garner further resources. With opportunities identified, the KM advocate will address what resources are needed to design and launch the pilot project, together with timeline.


Stage III is the pilot and experimentation phase whereby lessons in implementation are captured as part of the learning curve. This also serves to provide evidence of KM's business value. The roadmap provides a holistic approach sharing insights across the three dimensions – process, people and IT – that are important to the success of the pilot.

The success of the pilot sets the stage for the expanded use of KM during Stage IV. The pilot phase provides experience with addressing issues about the criteria for expansion as well as seeking approval for expansion. Stage IV will lead eventually to enterprise integration and full deployment of KM in the organisation.

However, as Gopinathan explains, the five stages are not necessarily sequential and each of these stages may overlap in actual applications. "Not all agencies begin their journey at Stage I. Sometimes the pilot and experimentation become the starting point whereas other agencies may move through the stages quickly, learning from early adopters and barely stopping to notice they have moved to a whole new level of implementation," he added.

Gopinathan said that the overall aim of the roadmap is to facilitate knowledge management at work given that individual employees cannot depend solely on their own knowledge. "It is important for organisational activities and practices to be put in place to realise this collective knowledge for the benefit of the entire public agency," he concluded.

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